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pent came out soon after being placed on board the ship in which our author left the scene of so many adventures, and like the genius in the Arabian tale of the Fisherman, when once out of the box, expanded into such a huge monster that the whole crew of the vessel drew off in mortal terror. Even the captain, armed with two revolvers, could not trust his trembling hand to shoot the python. Mr. Bickmore alone was cool and self-possessed, and in the coolest and airiest of costumes advanced to the conflict. "I felt the blood chill in my veins," he confesses, "as for an instant we glanced into each other's eyes, and both instinctively realized that one of us two must die on that spot." All but exhausted, he is at last about to succumb, when an axe is handed him and he slays the reptile. Tugging his vanquished enemy across the deck, he heaves him into the sea, and then sails on to the "great empire of China, where I travelled for a year, and passed through more continued dangers and yet greater hardships than in the East Indian Archipelago."

With these defects are mingled many interesting and well-told narratives, and certainly the author has exhibited considerable patience and perseverance in concealing the enthusiasm which doubtless forms an important part of his character as an explorer. We shall look with interest for a continuation of his travels in China, where he visited many places seldom described.

4.—*The Ring and the Book.* By ROBERT BROWNING, M. A. Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co. 1869. 2 vols. 12mo.

A WELL-KNOWN editor says that half the value of a newspaper leader is in its heading, or, if it have no heading, in its opening sentence. "The Ring and The Book,"—had ever poem a lovelier name? The costliest metal, the perfect shape, the dearest human affection,—gold, the circle, love,—are all suggested by the words, "The Ring." And "The Book," what is it but an image of the spiritual essence, stamped upon an alien element?

"Do you see this Ring?

'T is Rome-work made to match

(By Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,

After a dropping April; found alive

Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side fig-tree roots

That roof old fombs at Chussi: soft, you see,

Yet crisp as jewel-cutting."

Had ever poem a more fortunate first sentence? Seven vivid lines, as "crisp as jewel-cutting."

The works of the ancient poets come down to us winnowed by the forgetting winds of time; they are not classified according to years; they furnish us themselves the rules by which we praise them, and the verdicts have long been made up beyond reversal. Homer, Anacreon, Theocritus, are for us less men than parchment scrolls, — names wandering homeless in history; *vagatur nomen longe et late*. On the contrary a modern poet — Wordsworth, for example, or Shelley — is, in comparison, at a certain disadvantage, because his works, being all in the reader's hands, make an average impression below their highest merit. We read an ancient poem and ask, "Why has it come down to us? why is it admirable?" We read a modern poem and ask, "Is it admirable or not?" The solution must be strained from the crystals; the happy phrase is hurt by the common neighborhood of prose; and the splendor of poems in themselves without flaw is clouded by the memory of inferior performances.

No doubt there is poetry of Mr. Browning's which will live for generations; but we, his contemporaries, cannot pick out the lasting verses. Posterity is not likely to value most highly his brilliant skirmishes with unbelief and superstition, for these will be idle and hard to understand when the forms of thought and feeling with which they deal have passed away; nor his ingenious situations, for they do not consist of the simple relations which are the framework of common experience; nor his curious analysis of motives and character, for these are a surgeon's dissection after death. The future will prize, we think, a bit of sunset sky out of some landscape; a song; a burst of natural passion; a vague generalization, magically fixed by example; a speculative doctrine made by the imagination clear beyond the clearness of logical statement, — for in this order of ideas the syllogism sometimes perplexes and obscures.

"Paracelsus," once the most admired of Mr. Browning's poems, represents the youthful sentiment of its time, as "Childe Harold" represented that of another epoch. It is full of emphasis and music; but it is also diffuse and vagrant. It is the work of a young man, and, like many of the works of youth, not certain to be long remembered. "Luria" has been called the best of Mr. Browning's dramas. It is written in a noble spirit; but its plot is improbable, its lesson that virtue is sure of final recognition and applause in this world is, of course, false, and its characters are unreal, whether considered as persons or types. Yet "Luria" is an agreeable poem. The stage is adorned with the brilliant life of mediæval Italy, our best sentiments

are appealed to, and the chasms in the logic are bridged with a preacher's skill. A subtle intellect is so skilfully employed to disparage subtilty of intellect, that the reader may be pardoned for sharing the author's delight in his faculties, even to the extent of preferring to be the Italian rather than the Moor. Browning's dramas give us analyses of solitary characters, and developments of successive situations, not the continuous movement of life; hence the "Dramatic Lyrics," "Men and Women," and "Dramatis Personæ," are congenial compositions. Previously to the publication of "*The Ring and the Book*," we should have said that the pieces on which his fame would rest were among those thus entitled.

"*The Ring and the Book*," though in scope a literary novelty, is not essentially a novelty in plan. More than once Mr. Browning has performed the experiment of treating the same subject from different points of view. For example, under the obvious argument of "*Bishop Blougram's Apology*," stirs another more solemn argument, which bursts forth at the end in fire. Again, in "*The Glove*" the popular version of a celebrated story is given, but in such a way as to make the reader feel that the story is only half told, and ask for the nobler relation which follows. It is the child's game,—out of the same blocks successively to shape a triangle, a parallelogram, and a star. "*The Ring and the Book*" is an extended and complicated example of this method.

No incident in private life excites such general and prolonged interest as a murder. The first reports of the affair are eagerly read; contradictory facts and versions of facts are added every day; exaggerations, too gross for the newspapers, are current in conversation and increase the popular ferment. If the alleged murderer is arrested, the story of his arrest gives us fresh excitement, and we wait impatiently for the trial to begin that is to clear up the truth. What is the prosecution prepared to prove? What line of argument will be followed by the defence? Will the executive pardon? On the eve of execution did the criminal make a confession? Whatever the testimony, some will doubt the guilt, and some the innocence, of the prisoner. Some, admitting his guilt, will hold that it has not been legally proved, and others, that the provocation was enough to excuse the deed. Let the victim be a woman, young, beautiful and a mother; let a handsome young man be mixed up in the matter, as her friend and possible lover; let the murderer be the elderly husband; let the parties belong to high life; and let their relations with each other have been long talked about,—then are present the conditions of tragic interest,

"And Robert Browning, you writer of plays,
Here 's a subject made to your hand."

So the poet takes for the basis of his new work "a square old yellow book" with "crumpled vellum covers,"—the fanciless, documentary, crude facts of a Roman murder-case,—pure gold. He then considers by what added matter, by what characters and motives attributed to the several persons, the story will become shapable into an artistic form,—to carry out his figure, say, a ring.

"He mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works."

The possible versions of such a story admit of a threefold classification. First, there is the confused rumor which passes among the public from lip to ear. Secondly, there is the account of the transaction given by those who were concerned in it. Thirdly, there is the case as sifted under the forms of law. Each of these three classes may include three statements, namely, one for the alleged criminal, one against him, and one that of those who try to get impartially at the truth,—nine versions. But the story of the prisoner before the trial, when he pleads not guilty, may reasonably differ from his story after conviction, and after all hope of pardon is past. Thus the essential facts may conceivably be narrated in ten several ways; and each conceivable narration may be classed under one of ten heads. To exhaust in this manner a Roman murder case is the prodigious purpose of "*The Ring and the Book.*" Nothing could be more unlike the incidents which Homer delights in than this story. If he had it to tell, he would tell it straightforwardly, in part by narration, and in part by dialogue. He would show each fact in several aspects before taking up the next fact, with such an interest in his work as a healthy man takes in healthy men. Shakespeare would make out of the subject a second Othello. As he unfolded the plot, and led the dialogue, all the relations of each character to the rest, being present in his mind, would be present in every situation, and felt in every discourse. The student would be left to separate them, to follow through the play the thread of each, to perplex himself among the number of possible explanations, and, perhaps, to come to the opinion that explanation of the work, as of the world, is impossible. A didactic purpose would be absent but not missed in Homer, present but not obtruded in Shakespeare. In both works the power of the author would be impalpable but obvious, like the day; but his personality, the source of his power, would be far withdrawn. Might these poets be compared to the weaver, at each throw of whose shuttle the thread runs through a crowd of figures, and discovers

their shape and proportions? Might they be distinguished from the embroiderer, who thinks of a single figure, and plies one color at a time?

Browning adopts the form of narrative interspersed with dialogue; but the narrative and the dialogue are pieces of identical pattern. The characters are different pipes of the same organ-stop; and the ten poems are resembling tunes played in one style. The poet is conscious, like Lucretius, of a didactic purpose, not indeed speculative, but ethical or religious. Homer is alive with the sentiment of race; he is moved by the legends which are the history, the religion, the life, the pride of a whole nation. Shakespeare's motive is the love of human beings; he likes to portray, without judging them. Iago and Lady Macbeth, Dame Quickly and Dogberry, are as interesting and dear to him as Brutus or Imogen. Herein, because he is the one unmoral, he is the greatest, and the one un-English, of English writers. But the cause of "The Ring and the Book" is a moral and religious lesson, —

"This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation, words and wind."

The ten poems are ten sermons on the same thesis; and each is shaped by a logical process. The story is of no account, except as it serves the poet's purpose of showing a few characters in a great variety of relations, and of illustrating his thesis. To the reader who, losing sight of the purpose of the book, should object to the repulsiveness of the theme, the poet might say, in the words of "The Statue and the Bust," —

"O, a crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a test,
As a virtue golden through and through."

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- 5.—*Annals of the American Pulpit; or, Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of various Denominations, from the early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five.* By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D. Volume IX. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers. 1869. 8vo. pp. xii., 210; xiv., 242; xi., 135; xii., 172; ix., 91.

DR. SPRAGUE'S great work is approaching completion, only one volume remaining unissued. We call it a great work. It is so in other senses than that of bulk and weight. It is so in the energy, perseverance, and skill that have planned and executed it, in the truly generous and catholic spirit that has governed its execution, and in the em-